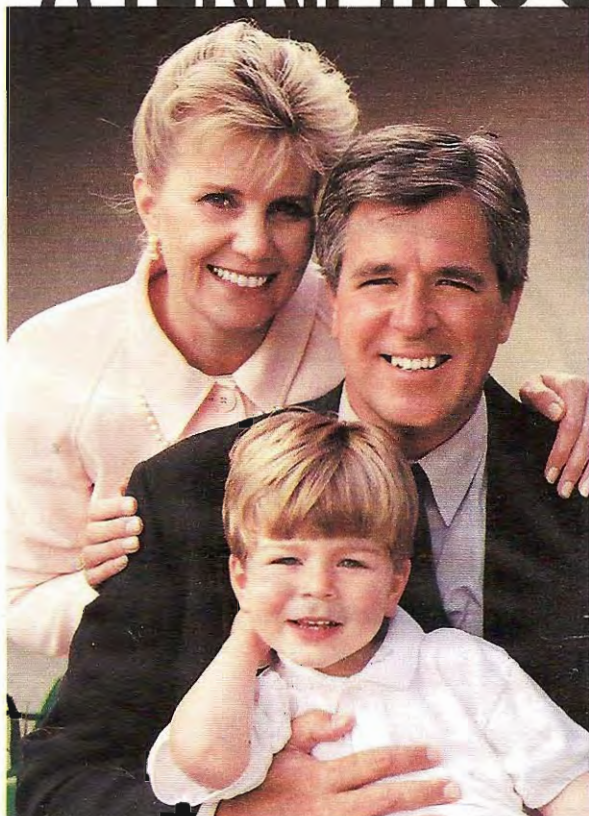


"A TERRIFYING CRIME MADE ME A CRUSADER"



Janette Fennell went from fighting for her life to fighting for a cause.

Janette Fennell narrowly escaped death after being locked in a car trunk with her husband. Here's how she's improving the odds for others. **BY MELANIE REHAK**

Late one evening in October 1995, Janette Fennell and her husband, Greig, were getting out of their car in their San Francisco garage when, suddenly, a pair of armed men rolled under the closing garage door and forced the couple into their trunk. The Fennells offered jewelry and money for their freedom. "They would not negotiate whatsoever," Janette, now 46, remembers. "It was just, 'Get in the trunk, get in the trunk.'" To make matters worse, the couple's 9-month-old son, Alexander, was still secured in his car seat in the back. "Sheer panic went through our bones when, from inside the trunk, we heard them say, 'There's a baby,'" says Greig, 50. "Then they started up the car."

"My only thought was, 'I don't care what happens to me as long as the baby's okay,'" Janette says. "I don't care if they rape me, just as long as the baby's okay."

Desperate to signal to someone on the outside, Janette began tearing at the interior of the trunk as the car sped along. "You think you're going to die, and all of a sudden a real survival instinct kicks in," says Janette. "I started to rip the trunk apart, all the carpeting or anything I could

trunk and robbed them of everything they had, including their ATM cards and wedding rings. "They had that gun right at Greig's throat," Janette recalls. Greig, who couldn't see his wife, told her later that he'd been thinking, "If I hear the gunshot I'll know they killed Janette first. If I don't hear it..." The masked men then locked the trunk again, leaving the pair to die. Janette says, "I said to my husband, 'That's it. They're going to come back and we're going to get cut up. It's over.' And there was no reason not to think that."

It was then that Janette's eyes fell upon a little piece of metal sticking out from the trunk walls where she had ripped the carpet away. Behind it was a cable. "I said, 'Honey, I think I found the trunk release.' I still don't know how I knew that was it." She guided Greig's hand to it; sure enough, when he yanked the cable, the trunk popped open. The Fennells were free. "It truly had to be divine intervention," she says. "I know that sounds so strange, but there's no other way to explain it."

The Fennells were luckier than most. They had an extra key hidden in their

glove compartment and were able to drive themselves to a nearby pay phone and call the police. And Alexander was unharmed—officers found him still secured in his car seat, sleeping soundly in the garage, where the intruders had dumped him.

But life would never be the same. Janette had recurring nightmares: "I'd dream we were out somewhere and the baby was right there, and then he was just gone. I kept losing the baby." To this day, she will not unlock the car doors until the garage door is completely down. "I rarely go out at night anymore," says Janette. "I look at people very differently now."

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BECOMING AN ACTIVIST

"After the incident, one of the officers told me, 'It never ends like this,'" says Janette. "Those words echoed in my head for the weeks and months that followed." She began to wonder how these crimes *did* end. She searched the Internet and began pulling news reports and court documents and was astonished at what she found. Since 1970, more than 1,200 people have been victims of trunk entrapment, either intentional or accidental. Of those people, between 20 and 25 percent—about 275 victims—did not survive. When she called the organizations that keep statistics on crime, including the FBI and the National Bureau of Criminal Statistics, Janette was even more shocked that no one kept track of crimes involving trunk entrapment. (continued on page 64)

trunk lock crusader

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That was all she needed to know. Janette, who had left a career in marketing to take care of her son, suddenly found herself with a new job: convincing automakers and legislators to take the dangers of being locked in a trunk seriously. "I didn't know what I was doing, but I was very determined to put a database together, since nobody else had done it," she says.

"All of my friends know that if I decide to do something, consider it done. We would be in a conversation, and

Mexico, Pennsylvania, and Utah died after accidentally trapping themselves in car-trunks. The deaths made immediate action necessary. "I can only wonder why it took the deaths of 11 children to finally bring national attention to this issue," says Janette.

Late in 1998, the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration (NHTSA) put together an expert panel on trunk entrapment and invited Janette Fennell to present her data. The panel made its recommendations in June 1999, and paramount among them was that the NHTSA require that all new vehicles be equipped with internal trunk release mechanisms by the year 2001. Janette

"My friends thought I was becoming a little obsessed. But I get that way with things I feel passionate about."

somehow it would always roll back to this issue. They would say, 'I think you're becoming a little obsessed,' but they also knew I get that way with things I feel passionate about."

"There were moments when it got to be a bit much," Greig says. "But when you look at the greater good, it takes away those moments when you think, I wish we could get back to a normal life. Then again, what's normal?"

In 1996, Janette Fennell founded an advocacy group called Trunk Releases Urgently Needed Coalition (TRUNC). She wrote letters to car companies and the government about the cases she was finding and publicized her cause on TV talk shows. "But the automakers didn't want to install releases inside trunks," recalls Janette. "It certainly isn't a sexy selling feature. At that time, the only thing everybody seemed to want was cup holders."

Then Janette met Bart Stupak, a Democratic congressman from Michigan and a former police officer. Stupak had been trying to pass legislation requiring trunk releases since about mid-1996. In June 1998, with Janette's database as ammunition, Stupak sponsored legislation that mandated a government study on trunk entrapment. "She had some information we could point to with some credibility," says Stupak, "which is something no one had before."

The urgency of their cause suddenly intensified when in July 1998, over the course of four weeks, 11 children in New

is still waiting—impatiently—for the rule to be issued. "Nothing will change until NHTSA writes the regulation and it's on the books," she says. But her activism, along with that of many others, has resulted in one major change: Now, for the first time, you can buy a new car with a standard trunk release. For example, almost all Ford, Lincoln, and Mercury lines are now equipped with interior handle trunk releases that can save a child (or adult) who is trapped in a trunk unable to move. In addition, General Motors is offering retrofit trunk releases for most of its cars dating back to 1990. (To get a kit, go on-line at www.gm.com/about/info/news/events/trunk/cac.htm; toll-free numbers are listed for each model.)

"We have made significant progress on this issue," says Janette. Mike Moran, spokesperson for Ford Motor Company, agrees. "We've gotten some very positive feedback," says Moran. "Janette was most aggressive in making sure that the company was aware of the issue and we wanted to act as quickly as possible."

Janette says she won't rest until *all* of the big automakers have made interior trunk releases a standard safety feature. "When everyone said, 'Sorry, we're not going to do this, go away,' I wouldn't go away," Janette says. "It was almost like God said to me, 'Your family was spared, and the only reason you went through this is because I needed somebody to get this fixed, and you're the one.'" □